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SUBJECT: STAFFDEL QUILTER'S VISIT TO ARGENTINA (AUGUST 16-21)

REF: Buenos Aires 1681

11. (U) This message was cleared by HCFA Staffer Peter Quilter.

12. (SBU) SUMMARY: (HCFA Staffer Peter Quilter visited Buenos Aires August 16-21, 2007, and met with Argentine political analysts, pollsters, and politicians to get their views on the political panorama for the October 28 presidential elections. A spokesperson for Roberto Lavagna's campaign discredited early polls showing Cristina Kirchner as the strong front runner, stressing that real voting intentions could not be measured sooner than thirty days prior to the elections. From Buenos Aires Mayor-elect Mauricio Macri's camp, National Congressman Federico Pinedo briefed on what he described as the current crisis of the political system and the various problems Kirchner's administration is facing, both domestically and internationally. He said Macri will likely make a presidential run in 2011. ARI National Congressman Fernando Sanchez voiced his belief that a new lineup in the Lower House following October elections could be key for new political realignments against the Kirchners, and also raised his concerns regarding a Cristina Kirchner administration. Political analyst Ricardo Rouvier talked about President Kirchner's reported post-Casa Rosada intentions to build a new political movement, based on his current "Victory Front" electoral machine, and doubts about the First Couple's capacity to continue micromanaging the country. The AMIA portion of Staffdel Quilter's visit was reported reftel. End Summary.

13. (U) House Committee on Foreign Affairs (HCFA) Staffer Peter Quilter was in Buenos Aires from August 16-22, for an overview of domestic politics and regional issues in the run-up to presidential, gubernatorial and legislative elections on October 28. He met with a variety of elected officials, party representatives and political analysts. EmbOffs accompanied Quilter on his meetings.

Roberto Lavagna: no polls and more action

14. (SBU) Quilter met with presidential candidate Roberto Lavagna's spokesman Alejandro Rodriguez and Coordinator for Policies Adrian Nador on August 17. Lavagna was Kirchner's first finance minister and is now running as the candidate of the opposition Radical (UCR) party. Openly disagreeing with polls that show Cristina Kirchner as the first round winner for October's elections, Rodriguez recalled past provincial elections, such as Misiones and Tierra del Fuego, where none of the pollsters correctly forecast the opposition's victory. He relayed what he called "off the record" conversations with different pollsters who indicated a decrease in Cristina Kirchner's voting intention (32-34%), thus forcing a second round, and asserted that the real voting intention could not be ascertained more than thirty days prior to elections. (Note: Recent polling shows Cristina at 45-49%. End Note.)

15. (SBU) Rodriguez and Nador said Lavagna's increasing support among voters was a result of his efforts to travel all over the country and get to know people. They said that Lavagna is focusing on three

important areas during the campaign: higher public security, higher and better employment and tax breaks for small- and medium-sized businesses.

¶16. (SBU) Although they complained about the insufficient and sometimes erroneous media coverage their campaign events receive, they expressed their optimism about Lavagna's prospects.

Macri Looking at the Presidency in 2011

¶17. (SBU) National Congressman Federico Pinedo, a member of the Foreign Relations Committee in the Lower House and a recognized leader of the PRO Bloc, a coalition between Mauricio Macri's party "Compromiso para el Cambio" and Ricardo Lopez Murphy's party, "RECREAR," explained the weakness of the political system since the 2001-02 crisis. Pinedo stressed the need for new political leaders and the systemic problem of the budget dependency of the mayors, which forces a direct relationship with the Presidency and not to the provincial Governors.

¶18. (SBU) In assessing the slate of presidential candidates for October elections, Pinedo said he considered Roberto Lavagna as the center-progressive candidate with the remnants of the Radical party, and described Elisa Carrio as a crusading firebrand, who cannot break the 14 percent voting intention ceiling. Pinedo derided front-runner Cristina Kirchner as someone who has psychological problems, is always in a bad mood, and has problems getting along with others. "Off the record", Pinedo stated that Macri's people had made every possible effort to discourage Lopez Murphy's presidential candidacy and back Lavagna to lead an opposition coalition for October elections. He also defined Ricardo Lopez Murphy as a very minor candidate because of his low approval ratings (around 4 percent).

¶19. (SBU) Pinedo characterized Kirchner's administration as "populist, and will turn its back on the longer-run to reap short-term benefits instead." He said Kirchner had isolated himself from "the universe", and internationally had good relations only with Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez. However, he expressed confidence that Brazil would stand in the way of Chavez's campaign to become spokesman of the continent. Pinedo also said that some cabinet ministers, like Foreign Minister Taiana, were afraid of Kirchner, and were limited in the authority they had in their daily work. Asked about Cristina's alleged interest in better international relations, Pinedo stated Cristina had traveled more than Nestor Kirchner but that her purported international relations team (Current New York Consul General Hector Timmerman or the Argentine Ambassador to France (Eric Calcagno) was middling. (The press has speculated about a possible foreign policy position for current Ambassador to Spain, Carlos Bettini, but nothing about Calcagno.

¶10. (SBU) Quilter asked about the reasons Macri's party would not be competing for the Presidency. Pinedo responded that Macri had floated the idea of his candidacy and contracted public opinion surveys. The results, according to Pinedo, were highly negative among voters. Macri had decided not to risk alienating or disappointing the City voters who had supported him for Mayor. However, Pinedo reaffirmed Macri's intention to eventually run for President and said his party is already starting to work on political agreements with Governors for the 2011 elections. Pinedo strongly asserted that his party is not competing against the Peronists, but against the Kirchnerists.

¶11. (SBU) Finally, Pinedo discussed the current deep anti-U.S. sentiment in Argentina, explaining that most Argentines feel there is little the U.S. offers Argentina. He offered that this perception may be a result of what he described as Washington's poor Latin American agenda. While making clear that he was not a supporter of Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez, he noted that, in the region, the U.S. was losing ground to Chavez's populist tactics and rhetoric.

Fernando Sanchez: the Lower House's new composition may be key

¶12. (SBU) Quilter met with Congressman Fernando Sanchez, a young and

talented politician who is a protg of presidential candidate Elisa Carrio (ARI), whom he replaced in Congress after her resignation earlier this year.

¶13. (SBU) Sanchez emphasized his perception of a decline in the Kirchners' political power. He called the corruption scandals "obvious" and stated they were promoted by internal administration disputes. During his short time in Congress, Sanchez said he noticed a growing feeling of discontent with the administration, noticeable even among those in the President's Frente para la Victoria (FPV) bloc. He said he was beginning to see a reluctance to vote for some of the President's bills. He said the Peronist leaders do not like Kirchner because he even betrayed those that had originally supported him (Sergio Acevedo, former Governor in Santa Cruz, Gerardo Conte Grand, former PJ Congressman and Interior Vice-Minister for a short term in 1992, and other members of the former Kirchernist faction "Grupo Talcahuano").

¶14. (SBU) On Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner, Sanchez said he was serving as Carrio's advisor when he first met her in Congress and could observe her in action. He said the First Lady was bad-tempered, very intolerant, and not very nice. He noted her intelligence and her ability to persuade but said that trait was not in evidence of late. He defined her prospective administration as "enigmatic" and said he held out little hope of her changing the current government style.

¶15. (SBU) Nevertheless, Congressman Sanchez expressed his confidence that a change in the makeup of the Lower House, following October election, could provide the nucleus for a political realignment in that chamber against the Kirchners. He noted that a similar realignment occurred during former President Menem's administration.

¶16. (SBU) Sanchez stated his belief that the recent spate of corruption scandals will not have much overall impact on public opinion and will not surpass the perception of corruption during Menem's era.

Asked about whether there had been any possible political motivations regarding the pending criminal and civil charges filed against his political mentor and presidential candidate Elisa Carrio, Sanchez responded affirmatively, although he never criticized the work of the court and mentioned all the procedural steps had been made in a timely manner. Carrio was facing charges of libel and slander for statements she made in connection with the murder of a fishing company owner in Patagonia. (Carrio was acquitted of the charges on August 27.)

----- ---Ricardo Rouvier:
Kirchner as the builder of a new political movement

¶17. (SBU) Political analyst and sociologist Ricardo Rouvier, who was hired by the Kirchner administration, among others, to conduct opinion polls and provide advisory services, stated that although his latest polls showed a minor decline in Kirchner's and Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner's image, Cristina's voting intention remained quite stable.

¶18. (SBU) Rouvier said the Kirchners had a love-hate relation with Peronism. They had belonged to the Peronist youth in the 1970s but Peron, in a famous political rally in 1974 in the Plaza de Mayo, literally expelled the leftist Peronists from the Plaza. They feel Peronism still owes them something. Rouvier said he believes President Kirchner will be working on the construction of a new political movement -- based on his Frente para la Victoria group (FPV) -- after December. This will be something similar to the project President Alfonsin had in mind during the 80's when he talked about the "third historical movement."

¶19. (SBU) Rouvier also expressed his doubts that the Kirchners had the necessary "psychological strength" to maintain their micromanagement of the country. He said, however, that the Kirchners represent the most interesting political offer for October, mainly due to the construction of their political movement (FPV) that supersedes the old traditional parties.

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